

# Complicitous Critique: A Dialogic Study of Agha Shahid Ali's "Postscript to Little Red Riding Hood" and Carol Ann Duffy's "Little Red Cap"

Mohammad Ashraf Najar

Assistant Professor, Govt. College for Women, Nawakadal

## Abstract:

Narrative is the basic means by which we make sense of the world and organize our experiences. However, some narratives are hijacked by those in power which creates an imbalance. Some voices are choked and side lined in the official historical versions. Narrative – literary or oral – becomes a site of serving dominant ideology. However, where there is power, there is resistance. Against the dominant ideology, the marginalized often critically revisits and rewrites the official history. In this critical revisiting, the dominant historical narratives are questioned and contested. Their supposed naturalness is exposed, and their constructed nature is laid bare. We find countless examples in literature where such reversals are accomplished – the center is dethroned and the absent takes charge. For example, Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* rewrites Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* rewrites Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* or Margaret Atwood's *Gertrude talks Back* rewrites the famous closet scene of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Yet, this rewriting is not done by simply attacking the dominant narrative, as it were, from outside. That would simply substitute one narrative with another along with the risk of creating a new hegemonic discourse. To shield such counter-narratives from the potential danger of becoming dogmatic, Linda Hutcheon gives a way out – complicitous critique. She uses this phrase in the context of postmodernism where she says that postmodernism is a paradoxical phenomenon which does not critique the dominant discourse from outside but from within. It uses the very structure that it wants to question. It is complicitous because it remains embedded in the conventions that it critiques; it is critical because it exposes the constructed nature of those very conventions.

The paper takes up two such poems – Ali's "Postscript" and Duffy's "Little Red" – which are a retelling of the classical European folktale of a little girl named Red. Both poems retell the same tale but from different positions. Both are critical of the dominant narrative yet both remain embedded in that narrative. Such a contradictory position is labeled by Hutcheon as 'complicitous critique'. The paper aims to apply the idea of 'complicitous critique' on the two poems and show how the counter-narrative presented by each poem participates in the dominant narrative in order to challenge it. However, this kind of participation problematizes the counter-narratives of the two poems which the paper will subtly explicate. The paper will also attempt to show that the paradoxical critique of inscription and subversion is not only thematically reflected but the very form of these poems explicates it. Further, the paper will also argue how Duffy's poem itself becomes a re-writing of Ali's poem; it takes off where Ali's critique ends. Viewed separately, each poem presents a layered narrative but taken together, they form a sustained inter-textual dialogue.

**Keywords:** Narrative, Critique, Other, Construct, Voice, Male Chauvinism, Literary Authority, Independent Female, Big Bad Wolf

The classical European folktale has a little girl named Red who lives in a forest. One day she leaves her house in order to go to her grandmother's house. However, she encounters a wolf on the way that lures her into talking and asks her about the location of her grandmother's house. Being innocent, Red confides in him and tells him about the location. The wolf thinks to himself that Red is "a tender young creature . . . nice plump mouthful . . . better to eat than the old woman . . . [and he] must act craftily, so as to catch both" (Grim and Grim). He diverts the attention of Red towards flowers and runs towards the grandmother's house while Red is still busy collecting flowers in the woods. The wolf devours the grandmother and puts on her clothes. When Red reaches there, the wolf devours her too. After this the wolf sleeps there and begins snoring which a woodcutter passing by hears. He comes inside, catches the wolf and snips his body with axe. Thereupon, he takes out Red and her grandmother from the wolf's belly and fills it with garbage and stones and sews it again. After waking up, the wolf begins to run but falls down and dies.

This folktale recounted to children through generations produced a narrative in which Red was shown as innocent and a victim, while the wolf was presented as a villainous figure that lured Red into trap. Ali's poem challenges this narrative in which, the poem argues, the wolf is othered and stereotyped as wicked. In other words, the poem is an attempt to give voice to the voiceless wolf. The poem is narrated through wolf's perspective that not only rewrites the historical narrative but also shows the constructed nature of that narrative. The wolf demands to give him *his* sense of history that he gobbled up Red so that the teachers had some story to narrate to kindergarten kids and impart them some moral lesson derived from that story.

The wolf elaborates that he could have gobbled up Red at the very first meeting but he deliberately chose not to do it so that a fascinating tale is constructed for children to listen to. The wolf laments that he is labeled as Big Bad Wolf when he took pains to stretch the narrative by conversing long with Red despite already knowing her grandmother's location and letting the woodcutter snip his "thick black fur" while pretending to be asleep (Ali 101).

In this sense, the poem brings the margin into limelight and provides him the narrative control. "Ali makes the reader revise the western hegemonic cultural codes that have traditionally served as the interpretative framework to understand and define the category of the 'human' in exclusionary, oppositional terms" (Bhattacharya). This reading presents the counter-narrative to the one which is already established in the popular imagination. Here, the past "is incorporated and modified, given new and different life and meaning" (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 24).

So far, so good; but this simple inversion is not what creates complexity in the poem. A nuanced approach is required which can make Ali's poem more than a simple revisiting. This is where Hutcheon is really illuminating. Regarding postmodern fiction, she states:

Postmodern fiction . . . exploits and yet simultaneously calls into question notions of closure, totalization, and universality that are part of those challenged grand narratives. Rather than seeing this paradoxical use and abuse as a sign of decadence or as a cause for despair, it might be possible to postulate a less negative interpretation that would allow for at least the potential for radical critical possibilities. Perhaps we need a rethinking of the social and political (as well as the literary and

historical) representations by which we understand our world. Maybe we need to stop trying to find totalizing narratives which dissolve difference and contradiction. (*Politics* 67)

Ali's poem while challenging the established tradition, invites us to question the narrative propounded by the poem itself. While the poem asks us to align with the wolf's story, it also undercuts this story with a buried narrative beneath the poem's primary narrative. So, on the one hand, we are complicit with the wolf's narrative as he sheds wolfish tears, but, on the other, we are made aware of the limitations of that narrative. This "is a strange kind of critique, one bound up, too, with its own *complicity* with power and domination, one that acknowledges that it cannot escape implication in that which it nevertheless still wants to analyze and maybe even undermine" (Hutcheon, *Politics* 4). The first instance of this ironical undercutting occurs when the wolf pronounces the moral of his manufactured kindergarten story "that little girls should not wander in search of flowers / and they must not talk to strangers" (Ali 100). The inferred moral exhibits the wolf's perverted thinking and betrays his male chauvinism. This is a clear instance of victim blaming where the perpetrator rather than holding himself accountable for the criminal act shifts the blame on to the victim by arguing that victim's behavior provoked him. Here we do not participate with the wolf, but are caught off guard by the irony loaded in the wolf's statement. We witness yet another glaring instance of justification given by the wolf for his action when he says that he "was no child molester" despite the fact that Red "was pretty" (Ali 101). The inference drawn here by the wolf is that it was Red's behavior that incited him to molest her when in fact he was not essentially a molester. These two instances create Ali's narrative that lies embedded within the wolf's narrative. Ali could have simply lashed at the wolf's behavior but that would have turned the poem into a propagandist piece. However, by entering inside the wolf's story, empathizing with his plight, and thereby revealing the gaps in his narrative, Ali's poem emerges as a tour de force. In other words, Ali's poem is a complicitous critique. Jacques Derrida considers this inside position unavoidable for any kind of critique. His comment is worth noting:

There is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to attack metaphysics. We have no language --- no syntax and no lexicon --- which is alien to this history; we cannot utter a single destructive proposition which has not already slipped into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest. (280-281)

Not only this, but there is more to Ali's story. This critique not only challenges the patriarchal discourse but also exposes the process of formation of this discourse in literature. When the wolf demands for the sense of plot and explains how he developed it, it raises the question of narrative control --- who speaks? Who has the authority to speak? Who is silenced? As the wolf was silenced from the established narrative, so is the woman silenced from his narrative. No sooner the wolf points out at the constructed nature of the historical narrative, than we begin to see the constructed nature of the wolf's narrative. The constructed nature of the wolf's narrative reveals a hidden narrative about women. In other words, the poem is a subtle dig at male literary tradition where the dominant narratives have always belonged to men. It teaches us that "both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past" (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 89). The wolf then is a representative of male literary authority that decides which story is to be told at the expense of other stories. This is the reason that the wolf unintentionally reveals his hidden patriarchal agenda only at two places in the poem, while the rest of the poem resounds with his authoritative voice. The ending of the poem is also quite fascinating --- it is about the ending itself. It talks about the appropriate timing of the ending of the story --- the stones spilling out of the wolf's belly and the children having a good laugh.

Ali wants to underscore the constructed nature of endings in narratives. The closures, it implies, are forcibly applied thus choking the voices of dissent. “Whether it be in historical or fictional representation,” Hutcheon says, “the familiar narrative form of beginning, middle, and end implies a structuring process that imparts meaning as well as order” (*Politics* 59).

Whereas Ali’s critique of the dominant culture gets a subtle treatment, Duffy gives it a wider space. Duffy’s poem emerges as an enlargement of what Ali hesitatingly reveals. In other words, Duffy’s poem is about the residual element of Ali’s poem. Duffy’s poem also presents a counter-narrative against the established narrative, but the narrative it counters against is the counter-narrative in Ali’s poem. In other words, Duffy’s poem counters the narrative of the wolf by exposing his male chauvinism. Duffy’s poem narrates not from the perspective of the wolf, but of Red who had been inadvertently marginalized in Ali’s poem. In traditional narrative, Red was presented as an innocent, passive victim of wolf’s molestation. However, Duffy’s poem turns the tables by bringing Red in the centre stage. She is no longer a passive object of male consumption but an active seeker of sexual intimacy. Duffy presents her with an agency of her own, and not a toy in the hands of ideology. It is “a method of exposing historic exclusions” (Varty 123). But this feminine assertion comes at cost --- complicity. Here too we are aligned with the wolf but in a different way --- by the way of Red. It is Red who willingly forges a relationship with the wolf. It is she who initiates romance by making it “quite sure he spotted” (Duffy 3) her which is revealed by the fact that this does not happen in her innocence but quite at “childhood’s end” (3). She participates in his narrative deeply, always conscious that “the wolf would lead . . . [her] deep into the forest” (3). She universalizes her complicity when she asks “what little girl does not dearly love a wolf?” (3). However, the final stanza presents a twist --- Red axes wolf from scrotum to throat. This shocking reversal forces us to reinterpret the whole poem. The complicity with the dominant narrative now appears to be a strategic move on Red’s part. She has dived deep inside the narrative to tear it apart from within, just as she tore apart the wolf’s body. The poem “at once inscribes and subverts the conventions and ideologies of the dominant cultural and social forces” (Hutcheon, *Politics* 11). The deliberate attack on the scrotum is an attack on male chauvinism. She drives her grandmother’s bones out of the wolf’s belly and fills it with stones. This action is highly significant because Red accomplishes it herself and does not remain dependent on a savior like the woodcutter.

But there is more to this story as well. When Red meets the wolf for the first time, he is “reading his verse out loud” (Duffy 3). This shows that the wolf is not only male but also a poet. So this poem too, like Ali’s poem, connects female subordination with literary discourse. Red addresses the reader directly by saying the reader may ask as to why did she do this, that is going with the wolf, and answers it herself, “poetry” (3). By this she means that the wolf has literary authority and she has to submit before him in order to enter into the world of literature and learn it. This suggests that the world of literature has been dominated by men while women have been excluded or silenced in its narratives. In an interview with Barry Woods, Duffy said that the grandmother’s bones represent “the silent women who aren’t present in English literature” (Dowson 24). This is what feminist writers explicate. In *A Room of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf explains this dismal historical situation by saying that “even in the nineteenth century a woman was not encouraged to be an artist . . . [but] she was snubbed, slapped, lectured and exhorted” (76).

However, the twist occurs when Red finally axes the wolf’s throat symbolically signifying the silencing of male literary voice. Red comes triumphantly “out of the forest . . . singing, all alone” which dramatizes the independent female poet acquiring literary authority (Duffy 3). Regarding this kind of

narrative takeover, Helen Cixous states that “Woman must put herself into the text --- as into the world and into history” (875). In cases like this, “there is an urge to foreground, by means of contradiction, the paradox of the desire for and the suspicion of narrative mastery --- and master narratives” (Hutcheon, *Politics* 61).

Taken together, the two poems raise some pertinent questions about narrative manufacturing, literary representation of women, and the status of marginalized groups. However, the meeting of the two disparate phenomena as feminism and the paradoxical critique expounded by Hutcheon is fraught with its own problems. Hutcheon’s complicitous critique does provide a philosophically viable tool to unsettle doxas, but it is this very critique that by being in cahoots with the dominant culture weakens its own force. Feminism has a solid foundation of its own --- it operates by making the oppression and marginalization of women at the hands of the patriarchal system its base from which it launches all types of critiques. But when it cooperates with any other system like postmodernism, it risks losing much of its force for the simple reason that a critique like postmodernism is double-edged --- ceaselessly critical but inadvertently complicit. The danger with this kind of fusion, say postmodern feminism, is that more focus is concentrated on the paradoxical nature of such critical practices rather than on feminism itself. It certainly does provide a strong legitimating support to feminism by exposing the constructed nature of dominant historical narratives, but it risks the shifting of attention from the practical feminist concerns to the conceptual acrobatics of the critical practice itself. When the focus turns towards the practice itself, the line between complicity and critique gets blurred which has some serious political implications.

### Works Cited

1. Ali, Agha Shahid. *A Walk Through the Yellow Pages*. SUN-Gemini Press, 1987.
2. Bhattacharya, Saradindu. “Agha Shahid Ali.” *Indian Writing in English Online*, University of Hyderabad, 2022, [indianwritinginenglish.uohyd.ac.in](http://indianwritinginenglish.uohyd.ac.in).
3. Cixous, Helen. “The Laugh of the Medusa.” Translated by Cohen Keith and Paula Kohen. *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 4, Summer 1976, p. 875. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173239>.
4. Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan Bass, The University of Chicago Press, 1978.
5. Dowson, Jane. *Carol Ann Duffy: Poet for Our Times*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
6. Duffy, Carol Ann. *The World’s Wife*. Picador, 2017.
7. Grimm Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. *Household Tales by Brothers Grimm*. Translated by Margaret Hunt, Project Gutenberg, 2004, [www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/5314](http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/5314).
8. Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory Fiction*. Routledge, 1988.
9. \_\_\_\_\_. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. 1989. Routledge, 2002.
10. Varty, Anne. *Women, Poetry and the Voice of a Nation*. Edinburgh University Press, 2021.
11. Wolf, Virginia. *A Room of One’s Own*. The Fountain Press, 1929.